

The availability, price and quality of food items in diverse food retail outlets

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Abstract

Despite large-scale, nationwide health promotion efforts, researchers continue to report socioeconomic and racial disparities in the prevalence of chronic disease, including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity and certain cancers. One possible explanation for these disparities may be found in examining the retail food environment in which healthy food choices are made by individuals. The local food environment can strongly influence the dietary choices made by individuals. Low-income residents have reported factors such as limited access to health food options and the high cost and low quality of the available food items within their communities as important barriers to consuming a healthy diet. Recent studies have shown direct correlations between a healthy diet and access to retail food outlets such as supermarkets and grocery stores. However, there are few studies that have directly assessed the availability, price and quality of foods sold in diverse types of food retail outlets and identified differences between and among the various types of outlets. Fewer still are studies that have identified these food item characteristics based on recommendations specific to cancer prevention.

This study identifies the availability, price and quality of foods recommended by the American Cancer Society for a healthy diet in the food retail outlets of Marion County, Indiana and determines if differences exist in these characteristics between and within store types and community deprivation.

In 2010 144 food retail outlets (supermarkets, grocery stores, convenience stores, gas stations, and ethnic grocers) were assessed through direct observation by trained researchers using a validated food retail outlet audit tool. Food items included fresh, frozen and canned produce; dry goods; fresh meats; dairy; and refrigerated foods. The price of specific food items with each food category was assessed. Quality was assessed for fresh produce category only. The environmental characteristics of the stores, including cleanliness, safety features, and the presence of health promotion message (e.g. 5-a-Day for Better Health logo) was also assessed. Each food retail outlet was characterized as being in a “high deprivation” or “low deprivation” community. Type of community was determined from a composite of socioeconomic characteristics using 2000 census block group data.

This presentation provides a summary of key research findings and highlights suggested translation of the research findings into health promotion practice and policy.

Funding support for this study was provided by the Indiana University American Cancer Society Institutional Research Grant. Census data work completed with the assistance of Shawn Hoch, IU School of Medicine.